

Little Rock Central High School

Little Rock Central High School
National Historic Site
Arkansas

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Soldiers and guardsmen escorted the Little Rock Nine for the entire school year.

TOMANO / UNIV. OF ARKANSAS
LITTLE ROCK ARCHIVES



Students still attend Central High School, which is closed to park visitors except for organized tour groups.

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Elizabeth Eckford walked a two-block-long gauntlet of threats and racial slurs.

WILL COUNTS / COURTESY OF VIVIAN COUNTS AND INDIANA UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Year of Reckoning

The school desegregation crisis at Little Rock Central High School put on trial America's commitment to its founding principles. It was the first significant test of the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The successful outcome affirmed the basis of that ruling—the 14th Amendment's promise of "equal protection of the laws."

What became a defining moment in the South's "massive resistance" to school desegregation began quietly enough with a plan by Little Rock's school board to gradually integrate the city's schools. But Orval Faubus, the populist governor of Arkansas with a reputation for relative moderation on racial issues, undercut local officials. Race was playing an increasing role in Arkansas politics, and Faubus was looking ahead to running for reelection in 1958. His actions turned ordered desegregation into violent confrontation.

Crying "states' rights" and floating rumors about planned violence, Faubus justified calling out the National Guard to keep order—by blocking the entry of nine African American students. Faubus also cited concern for their safety, but before the eyes of guardsmen, mobs followed, spat on, and threatened violence to the students. Later,

after a court had ordered the National Guard withdrawn, and with only police to control the situation, an angry crowd beat both black and white journalists.

In the weeks before the students gained entry under the protection of U.S. Army troops, the governor's defiance and legal maneuvering stoked a constitutional crisis. A growing media presence made this an ongoing news event played out on the country's TV screens. But while Little Rock became the face of the nation's desegregation troubles of the 1950s and 60s, the struggle for equal rights enacted there transcended region, race, and historical period. The struggle continues, and the commitment and courage shown by the Little Rock students is still needed if history is not to be repeated.

Constitutional Struggle

Governor Faubus
Spurred by other southern politicians and his own constituents to take a stand against desegregation, Faubus insisted that in *Brown v. Board* the Supreme Court had overstepped its constitutional authority. He invoked what he called constitutionally guaranteed states' rights to back his use of the National Guard to bar African American students from Central High. By so doing he directly challenged the federal government.



ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE



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President Eisenhower
Although not an aggressive enforcer of civil rights, Eisenhower believed deeply in the rule of law, the Constitution, and the appropriate use of military force. When Governor Faubus used armed guardsmen to defy a ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court, Eisenhower had no choice but to back constitutionally granted judicial and executive authority. He was the first president since Reconstruction to use federal troops to enforce civil rights.

"The only assurance I can give you is that the Federal Constitution will be upheld by me by every legal means at my command."

—President Dwight Eisenhower, in telegram to Governor Faubus

LITTLE ROCK, SEPTEMBER 1957



ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE



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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE



UNIV. OF ARKANSAS LITTLE ROCK ARCHIVES

September 2

Governor Faubus orders National Guard to bar African Americans from school for their "safety."

3

On first day of school mob gathers (above). Little Rock Nine do not appear.

4

Guardsmen bar black students from entering school. Soon after Elizabeth Eckford is turned away (above) she is harassed by mob.

20

Federal judge rules against use of National Guard to block students. Little Rock police are given responsibility for protecting the students.

23

Little Rock Nine enter the school; police cannot maintain order. Riot ensues and the students leave from a side entrance in a police car.

24

President Eisenhower federalizes Arkansas National Guard and sends 1,200 soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division (above) to Little Rock.

25

African American students enter Central High escorted by soldiers (above).

26

Faubus appears on television, saying "We are now an occupied territory." 101st Airborne Division leaves in

November. Little Rock Nine endure physical and verbal abuse throughout the year.

May 25, 1958

Ernest Green (above) is the first African American to graduate from Central High School. Green says: "It's been an interesting year. I've had a course in human relations first hand."

1958

Faubus temporarily closes schools, giving voters a choice: accept integration or reject it (which they do, thereby closing schools for the 1958–59 year). Sign erected by Little Rock citizens is shown above.

1959

Federal court declares closings unconstitutional. Schools reopen in August. Three African Americans attend Central High School, including Jefferson Thomas and Carlotta Walls.

U.S. SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

1849 *Roberts v. The City of Boston*

Supreme Court upholds segregated schools; provides precedent for *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

1881 Tuskegee Institute

Booker T. Washington founds school for African Americans. His emphasis on trades disturbs some African American leaders.

1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson*

Supreme Court establishes "separate but equal" doctrine.

1909 Formation of NAACP

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) looks to courts to achieve equal rights.

1936 *Univ. of Maryland v. Murray*

Maryland supreme court orders university's law school to admit African American student.

1946 *Mendez v. Westminster*

Ends segregation of Latino students in Orange County, Calif., schools.

1950 *Sweatt v. Painter*

Supreme Court finds that "separate but equal" is unattainable in higher education.

1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*

Supreme Court overturns "separate but equal" doctrine. *Brown II* (1955) mandates—though

ambiguously—desegregation with "all deliberate speed."

1960 Ruby Bridges

Six-year-old African American girl desegregates New Orleans elementary school, escorted through mob by federal marshals.

1972 Detroit Busing Plan

Busing plan is reversed in 1974 by Supreme Court (*Milliken v. Bradley*), affirming that courts could not remedy "white flight."

1976 Boston Anti-Busing Riots

Residents of South Boston riot in response to court-ordered busing.